

Wet & Dry Turning - Part III of IV

The Mad Woodturner

Unless you are going to finish-turn your piece while wet, you'll need to get the wood dry at some point. There's a big difference in how you'll go about drying it depending on if you're going to dry it before you start turning it or after you rough turn it. This month we'll focus on drying the wood before starting to turn it.

Let me first define "dry". Dry is a relative term. A piece of wood is considered "dry" when it has the same moisture content as the surrounding environment. Technically, it's called Equilibrium Moisture Content (EMC) and will fluctuate with the days' humidity level. "Dry" in Southwest Missouri isn't the same "dry" as in central New Mexico.

The first problem is determining how dry it actually is. You can use a moisture meter but those can be expensive and difficult to calibrate so that you get accurate readings every time. You can do a quick check by simply touching the piece. If it feels cool, then it's not dry. Or maybe you've just got a fever. You might want to check that cough too. Anyway, a more precise test is to just weigh the piece periodically while it is drying. As moisture is lost, the weight will go down. You'll need to take into account any wild swings of relative humidity especially around here. How often to take measurements will depend on what method of drying you are using. A measurement every week is fine for just air drying. A measurement every few minutes is required for microwave drying. Adjust accordingly.

So, now let's get to drying.... One method to drying wood before you start turning it is just to simply let it air dry. This involves placing your piece in a cool (not freezing) to warm (not hot), shaded area with plenty of space all around it for air to circulate but not have a lot of air movement across it. Some people just put it in their basements or under a shelf. A greenhouse is fine as long as you lift the sides a little and don't let it get too hot. The general rule is to leave it there for 1 year for every 1 inch of thickness to dry. It's also a good idea to seal the ends (endgrain) with some kind of wax (AnchorSeal is a commercial one) sealer, or even latex paint so the piece doesn't dry too quickly and possibly crack. If possible, leave the piece a little long so that if there are cracks in the ends, you can cut those ends off without decreasing the usable size of your blank.

Another good method of drying these blanks is to use a kiln. You can either hire someone with a kiln to dry your wood for you or you can build a small kiln yourself fairly cheaply. Maybe I'll write up an article in the future on how to do this if there's any interest in it. The key with kiln drying turning blanks is that it's often much thicker than what most kiln operators usually have experience with. Our blanks need to be dried quite slowly (when compared to normal kiln operation) and gently. Solar kilns are great but some of the larger industrial kiln operations don't work well because they use methods that are specialized to the lumber market. With the use of a kiln, the drying time for most large turning blanks can be decreased up to 10 times or more! So, a piece of unturned wood can be ready in as little as 2 months instead of 2 years. But it costs if you don't already have the equipment. Next month I'll present practical ways of drying those rough turned pieces like the use of the microwave, boiling, silica, bagging, diapers and more.

A Lathing Perspective - Part I of II

Debra (Faulkenberry) Bohnstedt ?

I am feeling introspective today and have done a little bit of reflecting on my perspective of the use of the lathe. In light of the past week's weather activity, I have spent some time reflecting on my life and what is important to me. My friend, Mr Dowell, once said that he'd been told many years ago that when he retired he should have 12 hobbies. Something that could be done regardless of what capacity was lost as the years went by. He said he agreed with that philosophy, and I would have to say that I can see the merit in that comment as well.

My lathing has been the most recent of the hobbies that I have collected along my life, crocheting, knitting, tatting, quilting, and beading have been long with me. Most of my hobbies require a great deal of dexterity and clarity of eyesight so I am hoping that I have these capacities as I grow older. The most satisfying right now is the work that I do on the lathe. I have done projects that have taken up to two years with the quilting and the crocheting. The lathe projects that I do have typically taken from 15 minutes to an hour, depending on the size and the complexity of the pattern and the resulting size. And satisfaction is found not only in the completed project, but also in the activity of lathing itself.

There is initially the choosing process. You may not choose your projects this way, but I often just walk into the shop and start looking at the wood. Unless I have a deliberate project to accomplish I will use this method to choose the project for the day. I start rummaging through my wood. I have big and small pieces. Light and dark pieces. Domestic and Exotic woods. Cured and green wood. Once I have started rummaging I start imagining what each piece would look like when it is finished. When one image becomes more prevalent than any other, then I can begin. Occasionally I have had one project started and have changed my mind and had to start something else. But, we're not going into that scenario right now, we're following the process from initial imagination to completion.